DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 940 EA 022 488

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TITLE Single Parenting and Placement of Elementary Students: A Review of the Research.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Family School Relationship; Family Structure; *Learning Disabilities; *One Parent Family; Parent Role; Special Education; *Student Placement

ABSTRACT

This review summarizes the current literature on the effect of single-parent homes on the academic achievement and learning disability placement of students. One finding of the review is that the research is inconclusive on the effect of single-parent homes on student academic achievement or on learning disability program placement. A recommendation is made for further research that controls for other variables, especially family income level. Most single-parent homes are headed by women, who generally have among the lowest income levels of all adults. (16 references) (LMI)

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SINGLE PARENTING AND PLACEMENT OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

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ED326940

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Kathleen R. McDermott

In the educational community, there is concern regarding the appropriateness of the ever growing number of students who are placed into special education programs and into Learning Disability Programs in particular. It is important that students who are being declared eligible for such special education placements be correctly identified. In making this eligibility decision, the multidisciplinary team must rule out that the student's learning problems are "primaily the result of . . . environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage." Since the family is the student's most immediate environment, the family configuration would apparently have an effect on the student and his/her academic progress. Therefore, it is important to determine if students are being over-identified as being in need of Learning Disability Programs as the result of their family configurations, such as whether or not they are living in single-parent homes.

The issue of the single-parent is becoming ever more important as the number of single-parents in this society increases. It is generally recognized that the majority of single-parents, who are raising children, are female. This causes the single-parent issue to become very intertwined with the issue of socioeconomic status. In some cases, the single-parent is employed, which also effects the family environment and opportunities for the parent to interact with their child/children.

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Although the impact of single-parenting seems to be important in the study of Learning Disabled children, there has been very little research specifically in this area. There has been considerable research dealing with single-parenting and academic achievement in general. Since level of academic achievement is a major determinant in deciding eligibility for Learning Disability Program placement, this more general research might also be applicable to the Learning Disability population. However, in order to confirm this, additional research specifically with the Learning Disability population is needed. Moreover, additional research with improved designs is needed to replicate the previous studies which were undertaken in this area.

The purpose of this review is to provide a summary of current literature concerning the effect of single-parent homes on the academic achievement and Learning Disability program placement of students. Although very little research has been done specifically regarding single-parent homes and placement into Learning Disability programs, there is considerable research which studies the effect of single-parent homes on academic achievement in general. Since level of academic achievement is a main determinant in Learning Disability program placement, it seems that research in the general area of academic achievement would be applicable to the learning disability population. An attempt was made to include the most current research available in these areas.

As McCormick (1989) indicates the definition of at-risk children varies among authors. In addition, there are numerous possible reasons for

children to be at-risk. One of these reasons is undiagnosed learning disabilities. Furthermore, many researchers agree that school failure is often associated with poverty or being a member of a minority group. Regarding poverty, the poorest of children live with single mothers. In fact, according to the Congressional Select Committee report, more than half (53.6%) of all poor children live in single-parent households headed by women.

The purpose of a study by Marsh (1989) was to determine the effect of living in two-parent, single-parent and step-parent families on changes in children's academic achievement, attitudes, and behaviors during the last two years of high school. Data used was from the commercially available data file for second follow-up of the sophomore cohort of the HSB study. It included data from 1980 when respondents were sophomores, 1982 when respondents were seniors, 1984 two years after the normal time for high school graduation. Cluster sampling was done for the HSB study and the total number in the sample was 14,825. Family configuration was determined by student response in their sophomore and again in their senior years of high school. Four family configurations were identified: two parents (mother and father); single parent (mother or father and no step-parent); step-parent (mother or father and a step-parent of the opposite sex); and other (neither mother nor father). Since information was obtained during both the sophomore and senior years, there were 16 total possible combinations. In different analyses, family configuration effects were estimated in comparisons of stable family configurations, in comparisons of recently divided families, and in comparisons of recently reconstructed families. These effects were tested on a diverse set of 22

outcomes representing academic achievement, attitudes, and behaviors. Across all the various comparisons, and all the different outcomes, family configuration had remarkably little effect on student growth and changes during the last two years of high school.

According to Shreeve, Goetter, et al. (1985), a study conducted in the secondary schools of a rural Washington State school district dramatically confirms that single parenthood adversely affects children's school achievement. The Eastern Washington University Department of Education surveyed 201 students from grades 7 through 12 in the district. Thirty-seven (37) of the students were from single-parent homes and 158 were from two-parent homes. The California Achievement Tests (Reading Comprehension, Language, and Math) were administered, and the grade point averages of all students were collected and compared. Findings regarding grade point averages indicated that in every grade, except the recently graduated senior class, two-parent students outranked their single-parent counterparts. When students were classified as "high," "medium," or "low" achievers by grade point average, the two-parent students ranked higher in every instance. On the California Achievement Test, a higher percentage of two-parent students scored at or above grade level than single-parent students in every instance in reading, language, and math.

The Kettering Foundation and the National Association of Elementary School Principals initiated a study to compare the functioning of one-parent versus two-parent children in 26 schools. Brown (1980) discussed the highlights of the findings at the end of the first semester of the 1979-

1980 school year. The available data were from 15 schools with a total of 8,556 students. The early results of the study indicated that there were disproportionate numbers of children from one-parent families in both the high achievement and low achievement groups at the elementary level. There were low numbers of one-parent students in the high achievement group, and there were high numbers of one parent students in the low achievement group. Although high school student achievement differences were less dramatic, there was still a disproportionately high number of secondary school students from one-parent families in the low-achievement group.

Milne, Myers, et al. (1986) studied the effect of family structure and parents' work patterns on students' achievement. They attempted to separate the various family background variables in order to determine the potential effects of single parent homes and working mothers. The exogenous variables considered were race, number of parents in the home, mother's educational attainment, and student's sex. Data were taken from two previous studies: The Sustaining Effects Study of Title I (Hoepfner, Wellisch, and Zagorski 1977) and The High School and Beyond (HSB) study (National Opinion Research Center 1980, 1981). Data including parents' marital status was taken from a parent questionnaire. Achievement data were obtained from the reading and math subtests of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). They concluded that both number of parents in the home and the employment status of the mother have significant effects. The maximum effects on achievement of number of parents can be as high as 0.25 standard deviation, or about 9 percentile points at the mean. The benefits of having two parents in the home are greater for

elementary school students than for high school students. Results indicated that, in general, students from two-parent families have higher scores on reading and math achievement tests than students from one-parent families. The total effects of number of parents were found to be significant in all cases for elementary school students, and they were generally in the same direction, but not significant for high school students. However, they concluded that the negative effects of a one-parent family on achievement are almost entirely mediated by other variables, particularly by income.

A study was conducted by Kraig (1989) which sought to determine if significant differences existed between the degree of academic achievement of 10th grade students who reside in one-parent/guardian homes as compared to those who reside in two-parent /guardian homes when students are grouped by sex, total family income, and ethnicity. In this study, number of parents referred to the number of adult persons with guardianship responsibility in the home whether that person was a parent, grandparent, step-parent, legal guardian or other designated person. Academic success was determined by the mean scores on the California Test of Basic Skills in the areas of total reading, total language, and total mathematics. The population included all 10th grade students at a high school in Fontana, California for whom test scores were available and who were enrolled in a regular English class. Among the results of the study, it was found that there was no significant differences in academic achievement levels for white or Hispanic students residing in one-parent or two-parent families.

A study by Hammond (1979) looked at self-concept, academic achievement and attitudes of children of divorce. The study consisted of 165 elementary school children: 82 from divorced families and 83 from intact families. The children attended two elementary schools in grades 3 through 6. The schools were located in a lower-middle to middle-class suburban community. Information was gathered from teachers and students. Teachers provided information on each participating student's achievement in reading and mathematics by marking his or her placement on a nine-point scale. Analysis of the data indicated that there were no significant differences in reading achievement between children of intact and divorced families. In mathematics achievement, boys from divorced families were rated lower, although not to a significant level, than boys of intact families were. There was little difference in mathematics achievement between girls from intact families and divorced families.

Chalker and Horns (1986) studied a sample of 119 students in 2nd to 5th grades. There were 69 students from intact families and 50 students from single parent or blended families (families with a step-parent). The students were from a suburb of a large metropolitan city in Alabama; the SES was middle to high. The study tested the hypothesis that there is no significant difference in reading achievement among children in grades 2 through 5 related to family structure. The total reading scores from the Stanford Achievement Test were used, and a two-way analysis of variance was performed to examine possible interaction between grade, family structure and reading score. A statistically significant interaction was indicated for children in grade 5 in intact families; they obtained significantly higher reading scores. However, students in grades 2 - 4 did

not show any difference in mean reading scores as a result of family structure. It was thought that the students in grade 5 were experiencing pre-adolescent changes of maturity and development which may have accounted for the difference in their school achievement.

Allen and Tadlock (1986) studied how the variables of gender, social class, and number of parents in student households related to achievement on a norm-referenced test. The sample was taken from 6,000 students in grades 4, 6 and 8 in Jackson Public Schools in Tennessee. Number of parents in household were either one or two. Students living with one parent or placed with a family by court order were considered from one-parent homes. Two parents included the following: both natural parents, one natural and one step-parent, one natural and one adoptive parent, and two legally adoptive parents. Achievement information was taken from the results of the California Achievement Test (CAT). Results indicated that apparently achievement is not affected by parental status for upper class pupils; however, for lower SES students, those from two-parent households do perform better than those from one-parent households. The researchers speculated that the latter finding was actually an economic relationship rather than a family one, single females, who make up most of single parents, are in the lowest income level of all adult groups.

In 1986, a study by Taylor (1986) tested whether a significant difference exists between academic performance scores of eighth grade students from one-parent homes and those from two-parent homes in the areas of reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and English. The population

included all eighth graders from three schools, who had submitted free lunch applications and who had taken the (Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). School records for the ITBS and the free-lunch applications were used to collect the data. Generally, the number of parents in the home was found to be statistically insignificant. However, academic achievement was found to be significantly related to father's presence in the home.

A study in Canada by Hett (1983) examined the effects of family separation on children in school-related areas. The population for the study included 3,600 elementary school children from a rural school district adjacent to Victoria, British Columbia. There was a sample of 1,1,241 students in kindergarten through 7th grade. This included 1,035 (83%) from two-parent families; 152 (12%) from one-parent families; and 54 (5%) other. A teacher questionnaire asked that they rate the students in several areas. In the area of achievement, pupils were ranked as low, medium, average, or high. Chi square was used to test differences among the three groups of students in the following areas: achievement, special education/learning assistance instruction, school social behavior, referrals for discipline reasons, attention to assigned tasks, absences from school, complaints to the teacher about physical pains or illnesses, and referrals to or from another school during the course of the school year. The differences among the groups in every case were significant beyond the .001 level ($p<.001$). On the whole, children from single-parent families and those from other family arrangements, such as remarriages, appear to be more at risk academically than do their two parent counterparts. A second measure of academic achievement was also obtained: teachers indicated if pupils received special education or learning assistance instruction during

the course of the current school year. Again, children from single-parent and other family arrangements showed signs of disadvantage academically.

Toro, Weissberg, et al. (1990) studied differences between children with LD and children who were not LD in three domains: social problem-solving skill, school behavior, and family background. Family background was assessed in the following six problem areas: separation/divorce of parents, illness or death of a family member, lack of educational stimulation at home, economic difficulties, family pressure on the child to succeed and family difficulties. The study consisted of 172 children; 86 of the children were LD between the ages of 7 and 11 and they attended self-contained LD classes. They were compared on social problem-solving skill, teacher-rated school behavior, and teacher-rated family background characteristics. Chi-square analyses of the family background data indicated that children with LD had significantly more family problems than non-LD children in three of the six areas. However, no significant differences were found between the two groups based on separation/divorce of parents.

In a study by Melekian (1990), family characteristics of dyslexic children were studied; in particular, one of the characteristics was matrimonial status. The sample consisted of 249 children with severe reading retardation who were attending a full-time center for dyslexia at Saint Cloud, near Paris, France, between 1970 and 1986. To assess reading achievement, two tests were administered: L'Alouette, a standardized reading test that evaluates reading skill without assessing comprehension,

and Jeannot et Georges, which assesses both reading skill and comprehension. Family characteristics, such as marital status, were obtained from admission records. Melekian found that mother's marital status did not seem to bear any significant relation to dyslexia in this group. In addition, while indicating that single-parent status has attracted little attention, Melekian cites earlier studies (Anderson and Kelley in Critchley, 1970; Hallgren 1950; and Rutter et al. 1974) which indicate that single parent homes do not contribute to reading and writing retardation.

It can be seen that a review of the current research is inconclusive regarding the effect of single-parent homes on student academic achievement, in general, or its effect on student placement into learning disability programs. In fact, very little research has been done in the specific area of the relationship between single-parent homes and learning disabilities. It appears that much more research must be done in the area of family configuration and its impact on placement of students into learning disability programs. In addition, it is important that other variables, especially family income level, be controlled. This is extremely important, since most single-family homes are headed by women, who are generally among the lowest income level of all adults.

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